



Becoming a distance student

Identifying and managing the key challenges

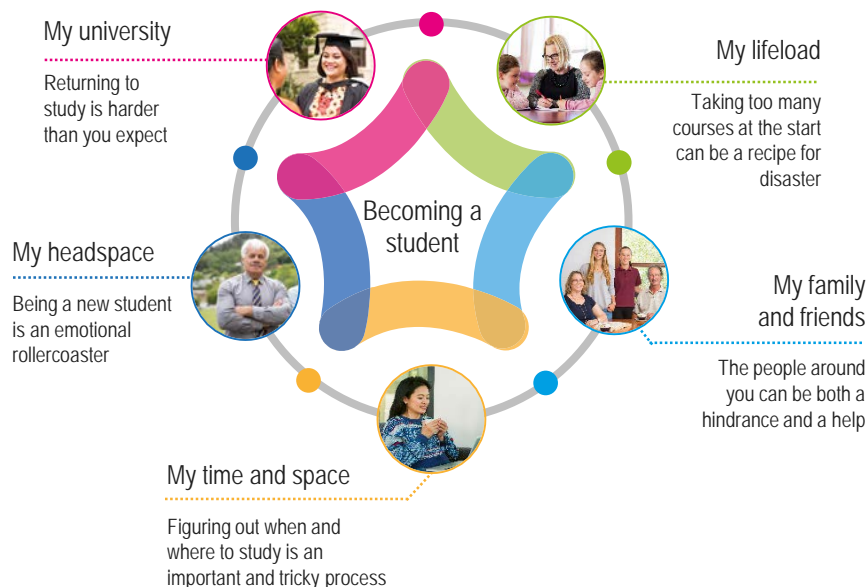
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Any transition to university study is difficult, but learning how to become an effective distance student has particular challenges. First year failure and withdrawal are higher for distance students than for campus based students. This is partly because distance study requires a greater degree of self-motivation. But it is also because distance students have often had a gap in their education and are combining study with family commitments and paid or voluntary work.

Research with mature-aged distance students at a New Zealand university has identified five key challenges new students face. The research surveyed over a thousand students and comparisons by age and mode of study found important differences in how these groups approach study. Then, 19 new students and their families were interviewed both before they started university and at the end of their first semester. The students also recorded weekly video diaries throughout the semester talking about their experiences. The five challenges are distilled from these data sources.

Toni: It is like a new person coming into your household. If you don't know that person at all, things are a bit tense and a bit awkward. Takes a lot longer to get to know each other. My goodness! There are things that you like about it and things that you don't like. Sometimes you try to avoid it. I was going to give up. I wanted to kick that person out a long time ago.



My university

The challenge: University study requires a lot of new skills such as academic writing and library research. Students who are successful in other areas of life can find it hard to be a beginner again. Their grades may not be as high as expected and they feel like a failure.

What can help? Be patient – you will get better at this. Dedicate time to skill learning and use the resources available. See marks as part of the learning; use feedback to improve. Remember: Smart students seek help.

Charlotte: It felt that anything less than an A was like a failure.

Jeremiah: I was stressed. Crikey! First time I'd had an exam in 30 something years.



My lifeload

The challenge: When students calculate how many courses they can fit into their lives they a. assume life is always perfect; b. forget that sometimes you just don't want to study; and c. don't realise the extra time it takes when you are a new student.

What can help? Be realistic and start small with just one or two courses in your first semester. You can always speed up once you have learned how to be an effective student and have experience with managing study around family and work.

Sarah: My advice would be, don't bite off more than you can chew. Take what you think you can do and then halve it.



My headspace

The challenge: Learning is a deeply emotional process and students don't expect to experience such a range and depth of emotions. Negative feelings such as anxiety, stress, and frustration are common and sometimes the work is relentless and even boring. These negative emotions can inhibit motivation and learning.

What can help? Be prepared for this – recognise it is normal and you're not the only one freaking out. Talk things over with family and friends and connect with students through the course or Facebook. Focus on your interest in the content and be proud of small achievements. Celebrate success.

Natasha: I have had the highest of highs and the lowest of lows.



My time and space

The challenge: Students study by distance because it theoretically allows them to study while working and/or caregiving. But they still have to find space and time to study, which is tricky when the home is shared and time is stretched between many roles. New students get behind easily, and find it hard to catch up.

What can help? Be flexible – there is no one right way to study. Try different places and different times to find what works for you, your family, and your study. Be creative – some tasks can be done in smaller chunks of time and space, e.g. listen to Podcasts while doing dishes.

Daniel: You have to experiment with study to find what works for you.



My family & friends

The challenge: Other people in your life can be a valuable support, but they can also be a barrier. Family may have good intentions at first but reality can be different. Students can feel guilty about children and partners may resent the time that study takes.

What can help? Talk with them about why you're studying. Ask for help. Family and friends can provide emotional, practical, and even academic support but often they need to be asked. Remember, this is a big change for everyone, so be patient and keep talking.

Lexi: It's starting to be a struggle. When the kids are sick. The whole novelty of being quiet because Mum is studying is wearing off.

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